

genders, bodies, politics

writing by Alison Phipps

Identity, experience, choice and responsibility

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*This is the transcript of my keynote speech at a conference at Queen Mary University on June 27th 2015, entitled '[Feminist Futures: critical engagements with the fourth wave](#)'. The full title of my talk was '**Identity, experience, choice and responsibility: feminism in a neoliberal and neoconservative age.**' There are various sources linked throughout – if you are not within a university and therefore unable to access the academic journal articles, [send me an Email](#) and I can download them for you.*



Hello. I'm Alison Phipps and I'm Director of Gender Studies at Sussex. It's great to be here and I'd like to thank Amaleena, Alice and Anna for inviting me to speak today. We can – and I'm sure we will – debate whether we're currently witnessing a 'fourth wave' of feminism and what this is, but for now I'd like to say it's fantastic to be part of such a dynamic and thoughtful group. Looking at the [other abstracts](#), I'm especially flattered to have been invited to give the keynote and hope I don't disappoint!

I think one of the reasons I was asked to open the conference was that my work attempts

to develop a meta analysis of feminist theory and activism. Some of this was brought together in my book which came out last Spring, called *The Politics of the Body: gender in a neoliberal and neoconservative age*. In this I developed a political sociology of various different debates, with a focus on interactions between different types of feminism (or 'waves' if you want to use that term). If any of you have read it, the talk today will move on from the book – as always when you attempt to develop a 'history of the present', I'm standing on uneven and shifting ground.

For those who haven't read it, the book was six years in the making and drew case studies from contemporary events and discussions in political and media spheres. But as with most academic projects, the inspiration was personal – in 2008, I was sitting in class with some of my Gender MA students listening to an Iranian student talk about her decision not to adopt the chador and her own view of veiling as oppressive (I realise that this view is not shared by all Muslim women). While she was still talking, she was interrupted by a white European student who explained to her that the veil was empowering instead.

I found this incident fascinating, not because of the substance of the discussion but because of how it was constituted – it simultaneously reversed and reiterated the dialectic between women from Muslim-majority societies and Western feminists. Regardless of the positions being adopted, the encounter still involved a white woman telling a woman of colour how she should think and behave. This started me thinking about how contemporary feminisms are located within broader political frameworks and trends, and how the dynamic between ideas and positionalities might play out.

So I started reading and researching – and while doing this I also conceived my first child. In the summer of 2010, heavily pregnant, I went with my partner to a neighbour's barbecue, where we met the directors of an alternative theatre company who had had their third child, at home, the previous year. They were a straight couple and the man was anxious to reassure me that my body was perfectly designed to give birth without any medical intervention, and that this would put me in touch with my powerful, primal womanhood. My partner (also a man) asked what he should do during while I was undergoing this epiphany. 'You protect the door of the cave' was the answer.

This conversation illustrated to me in a very immediate way how 'women's empowerment' can be co-opted by conservative narratives. It also reminded me of other problematic agendas, in particular around sex workers and Muslim women, which use the idea of women's liberation to reinforce particular value systems, dominate social, political and cultural Others, or save women from themselves.

Soon after I gave birth (not in a cave), Julian Assange was arrested in the UK in response to allegations of sexual assault made by two women in Sweden. You all know the story – after a long legal battle he lost his appeal against extradition and fled to the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, where he was granted asylum on humanitarian grounds (and as far as I know he's still there). The fact that a powerful man on the anti-establishment left had been accused of sexual violence was not shocking. What did strike me was the support he got from progressive journalists, politicians, activists and celebrities, even some high-profile

feminists, almost all thinking that the case was nothing more than a neocon plot.

One of the things this case exposed was how the relationship between 'helping women' and neoconservative rhetorics and projects, and the complicity with this by some strands of feminism, has led to anti-feminist feeling in some progressive circles. But what I also came to understand, and what I argue in the book, is that the rejection of neoconservatism within feminist politics can often slip into emphasising neoliberal ideas around identity, responsibility and choice. I should say at the outset however that I'm not putting forward one of those critiques of 'choice feminism' which have been doing the rounds in the media recently – I hope I'm saying something much more nuanced.

I'm not the first person to have explored how feminisms are framed by broader political rationalities – I'm indebted to [Eisenstein's ideas](#) about the co-optation of liberal feminism by corporate capitalism, [Fraser's work](#) on feminism's relationship with neoliberalism, and [Mohanty's interpretation](#) of the intersection between neoliberalism and postmodernism in radical social movements. What I've attempted to do is combine the theoretical and the empirical in a detailed account of these relationships in a few key topic areas – sex work, sexual violence, childbirth and breastfeeding, and gender and Islam. My work also emphasises the inherent conservatism of radical feminism which contributes to this dynamic, although there isn't as much on this in the book as there should be. I'm sketching with a fairly broad brush, so I do miss things and my ideas are constantly changing.



I want to start with Assange, as this case helps in thinking through how the relationships between radical feminism and neoconservatism can produce reactionary politics in progressive circles. When he was arrested, I was struck by the fact that his defenders not only engaged in victim-blaming but offered critiques of the notion and subjectivity of victimisation itself.

On top of the misogynist tropes and conspiracy theories, one of the lines of defence offered was that 'victim politics' betrays deficiency and fragility and fuels neoconservative paternalism. This came mainly from high-profile feminists. The author [Naomi Wolf claimed](#) that rape shield laws (which protect the complainant's identity) were a Victorian relic which didn't treat women as moral adults. Sex industry scholar and activist [Laura Agustín argued](#)

that Swedish law positioned women as helpless victims and labelled anything unpleasant rape or abuse.

Both these commentators expressed a postmodern sensibility around how the term 'victim' constructs experience and interpellates people in particular ways. [Women Against Rape](#) offered an explicit critique of how radical feminist theory and activism around pornography, rape and trafficking has been co-opted by and sometimes complicit with neoconservative agendas. This is absolutely true – [Kristin Bumiller](#) and [Elizabeth Bernstein](#) have shown how anti-violence and anti-sex industry feminists have collaborated with punitive and often racist and classist state machinery around crime and immigration. [Leila Ahmed](#) writes about how a 'colonial feminism' has justified incursions into particular countries, and [Gargi Bhattacharyya](#) has explored how the War on Terror in particular has been conceptually dependent on Othering Muslim cultures as peculiarly misogynistic and homophobic.

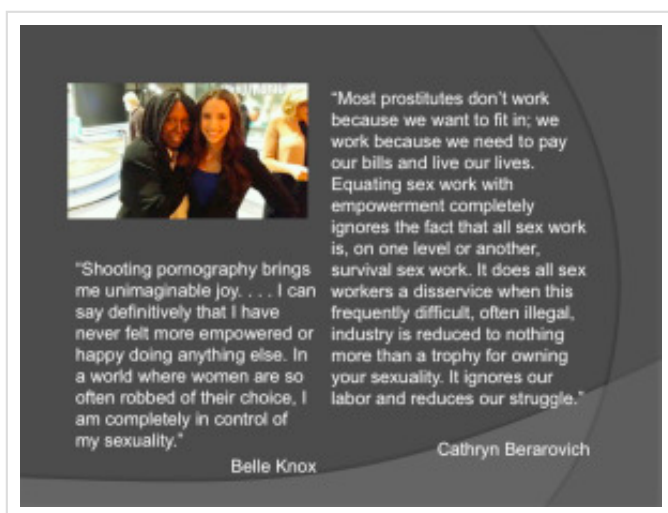
However, in the Assange case it was fascinating that these political critiques of the deployment of victimhood as a discourse were individualised to both defend a powerful white man and discredit his accusers, who, in [Naomi Wolf's opinion](#), were 'using feminist-inspired rhetoric and law to assuage what appear to be personal injured feelings.' In statements like this, postmodern deconstruction intersected with the neoliberal politics of personal responsibility.

In the neoliberal milieu, we are all free to create our destinies through consumer choice. The playing field is level, which means that if we fail we've only got ourselves to blame. This rationality positions social justice movements as 'victim philosophies' peddled by people who don't want to take responsibility for themselves – this charge has been particularly levelled at feminism and was implicit in many of the comments made about Assange. Sweden was depicted as a country full of cantankerous shrews whose grievances were being exploited by neocons to suppress a powerful dissident.

Neoliberalism has shifted the discussion away from structural dynamics and on to personal failure and success. The pressures this creates, especially for young women, have been highlighted empirically: [Baker's study](#) of young women in Australia and [McCaffrey's study](#) of sexual violence survivors in the US are two of those which suggest that being a victim is now associated with a lack of responsibility and seen as a sign of psychological under-development. This is especially ironic in light of the contemporary proliferation of forms of violent harassment on social media, many of which disproportionately affect young women, and the renewed debate about [violence against women students](#).

Of course, we've also witnessed neoconservative moral panics over these issues and others – but at the level of lived experience neoliberalism creates an imperative to triumph over bad experiences like these and perform happiness and success. This doesn't just apply to women – [Pharrell Williams](#) was recently widely criticised after he stated on Oprah that: 'The 'new Black' doesn't blame other races for our issues.' Statements like this need to be properly contextualised – and although we need to reject a feminist politics focused solely on women's victimhood, we also need to ask critical questions about what it means to talk about agency in a neoliberal context.

The academic 'turn to agency' has generated some fascinating and nuanced analyses of how people negotiate social structures and process power relations – for instance [Sirma Bilge's work](#) on veiled Muslim women and [Elizabeth Bernstein's ethnographies](#) of sex workers. However, within neoliberal rationalities and often within media environments, ideas about agency can be flattened out into the much more facile notion of 'choice'. This produces more simplistic narratives – for instance, Orientalist portrayals of the 'empowered, dignified' Muslim woman, or 'happy hooker' formulations of the sex industry. In the book I spend some time analysing the [Belle de Jour novels and TV series](#) and [Tracy Quan's serialisation of her life](#) as Manhattan call girl. While fictional, both these pieces were incredibly influential in the zeitgeist while I was writing, and material such as this informs a popular contemporary construction of the sex industry as glamorous, edgy and progressive.



More recently, another figure has become prominent in this discourse – Miriam Weeks, the Duke University student who was outed as pornography actress Belle Knox last year and is now a mainstream celebrity. When she was outed, [Weeks responded with an article](#) in which she stated: "Shooting pornography brings me unimaginable joy. . . . I can say definitively that I have never felt more empowered or happy doing anything else. In a world where women are so often robbed of their choice, I am completely in control of my sexuality."

One can certainly see this statement as an understandable reaction to the stigma and judgment involved in Weeks' exposure. Nevertheless, this 'happy hooker' formulation fits well with neoliberal themes and has achieved broad cultural reach – and it's been criticised by sex working feminists and activists who argue that it smoothes over their realities, doesn't allow them to express ambivalence about their jobs and erases the experiences of less privileged sex workers, often those who sell services from the street. [Cathryn Berarovich](#), in an article entitled 'Don't Rebrand Sex Work as Empowering', argued directly in response to Knox: "Most prostitutes don't work because we want to fit in; we work because we need to pay our bills and live our lives. Equating sex work with empowerment completely ignores the fact that all sex work is, on one level or another, survival sex work. It does all sex workers a disservice when this frequently difficult, often illegal, industry is reduced to nothing more than a trophy for owning your sexuality. It ignores our labor and

reduces our struggle.”

The rebranding of sex work as empowering that Berarovich identifies calls forth a neoliberal concept of choice which juxtaposes it against victimhood and empties it of context and socioeconomic framing. Structures are situated outside the act of choosing, which then becomes a selection between a predefined set of alternatives and the role of factors such as market capitalism, community ties and gender relations in creating the available options becomes invisible. Formulations like this are most evident in the media, but can be observed in academic debates as well. Contemporary ‘sex positive’ sex work research sometimes fails to address ‘push’ factors like economic hardship (and/or the lack of other available employment opportunities), which have been highlighted by sex work labour rights activists. In her work on veiling, Bilge cites the disappearance of complex factors related to family and tradition, in some of the feminist scholarship celebrating women’s choices to cover their hair and faces. What we are left with here is the idea of choice as self-expression, which lacks analytical depth and suspends critique.

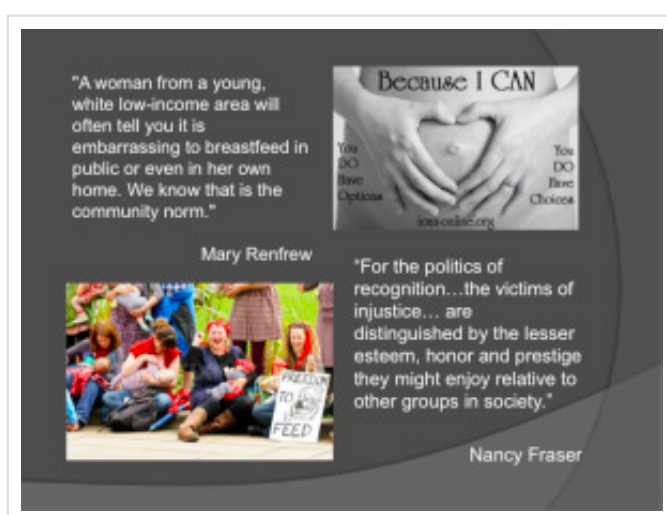
However, an analogous and similarly over-simplified focus on choice also exists on the other side of these debates in which feminists (often of the radical persuasion) attribute false consciousness to the chooser. Within this perspective the only structure that matters is gender, and women are defined as complicit in or duped by that system without proper analysis of how intersecting factors such as class, culture and race shape their opportunities and decisions.



The ‘end demand’ campaign around the sex industry is an example of how this type of politics can lack structural framing – it focuses on criminalising the client’s choice to buy but ignores how the sex worker’s choice to sell is often structured by economic or other social realities – for instance economic coercion or restrictive immigration policies – which will not just melt away if demand is quashed. So again, a preoccupation with ‘choice’ fails to grasp the material framings of the industry and derails discussions about safety and rights.

One of the critiques often made by contemporary radical feminists is that their younger and third- or fourth-wave counterparts are ‘choice feminists’. However, this devolves critique of the neoliberal commodification of ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ and targets it instead at

individual women who are making choices to survive – for example, by selling sex – in a patriarchal culture. In an article called ‘The Trouble with Choosing Your Choice’, Canadian feminist [Meghan Murphy writes](#), ‘within our wide array of ‘choices’, I suppose we are now to applaud our ‘freedom’ to ‘choose’ pornography or prostitution? I choose my choice. But will choose it consciously. And with my pants on’. It’s not difficult to see the judgment in this statement, or the attribution of ‘false consciousness’. Ironically also, the rationale is itself neoliberal – despite the fact that Murphy critiques ‘choice feminism’ for failing to appreciate the structures that shape women’s decisions, her politics is complicit with an individualising of responsibility in the assumption that it’s possible to simply ‘choose differently’. As sex worker and activist [Molly Smith has pointed out](#), this perspective betrays unexamined privilege: ‘I’m struck’, she says, ‘by how ‘choice discourse’ [meaning critiques of ‘choice feminism’] often seems to be used by women with more power writing about women with less’.



Childbirth and breastfeeding both sit within the institutionalised discourse of ‘informed choice’ adopted by the NHS and other Western health services. This framework also exists rather uncomfortably alongside the principle of women’s empowerment, especially within childbirth and breastfeeding activism. The narrative here focuses on empowering women to make the best choices for their children, and advocating that these choices be enabled and respected by the medical establishment.

Here again however, the ‘right’ choices have been predefined. Women are empowered to choose to birth naturally and to breastfeed their infants, but if their choices are different this discourse also begins to collapse in on itself with attributions of false consciousness. Those who want or have a more medicalised birth or use infant formula are in need of behavioural interventions to help them ‘choose better’.

The normalising judgment implicit within the neoliberal emphasis on ‘choice’ has already been identified, for instance by [Bev Skeggs](#), [Angela McRobbie](#) and others who write about the contemporary cultural class war. This is often fought through the medium of popular culture, for instance in reality and makeover TV in which working class participants are shamed, patronised and educated to ‘choose better’ in line with middle class norms. We can observe a similar dynamic in the discourse around mothering, and the behavioural

rhetoric of 'normal birth' and 'breast is best' also invisibilises structural factors.

Neoliberal ideas about choice are very much mind over matter – and in relation to childbirth and breastfeeding this has reached a peak where the will to succeed even takes precedence over human biology. I recently read an [article by Emily Wax-Thibodeux](#) in the Washington Post entitled 'Why I don't breastfeed, if you must know'. Wax-Thibodeux writes about how, following the birth of her first child, she felt compelled to disclose her history of breast cancer and bilateral mastectomy to lactation consultants because of the pressure to breastfeed. They told her to try nevertheless and one of them suggested, 'the milk may come out anyway, through your armpits'.

Choice, in the neoliberal context, has acquired a magicalism which speaks to the retreat of the structural and even allows it to triumph over medical and biological realities. This also needs to be seen in relation to ideas about the risk society – and parents (mothers in particular) are primarily expected to ensure their children's future health and prosperity through doing everything right. Natural birth and exclusive breastfeeding are pivotal components of this agenda, despite the fact that studies are contradictory and there's rarely any attempt to control for variables such as socio-economic status and parenting styles. 'Informed choice' is only as good as those doing the informing.

In a context where health and social supports are dwindling, there's been a behaviouralisation of health which is particularly evident in relation to birth and breastfeeding. This does not acknowledge structural constraints on choice, and the main mitigating factor which enters birth and breastfeeding politics is social stigma. For example, there's an individualistic framing of attitudes to breastfeeding as the problem in the controversial 'breastfeeding for shopping vouchers' scheme targeted at working class women. [Mary Renfrew](#), one of the academic advisors on the project, was quoted in the Guardian in 2013 as saying: "A woman from a young, white low-income area will often tell you it is embarrassing to breastfeed in public or even in her own home. We know that is the community norm."

Breastfeeding activism often foregrounds these ideas, within a critique of the sexualisation of breasts which creates a taboo around exposing them in public, and drawing on the moral panic around sex and popular culture. Proceeding from this analytical framework, large-scale public breastfeeding is the preferred mode of action, usually taking the form of the breastfeeding 'flashmob', where activists descend on a public place to feed. However, actions like this often supplant the work of lobbying governments for structural changes – better healthcare and social welfare, workplace rights, maternity benefits, a living wage, and more and better-paid midwives.

The main players in the contemporary 'lactivist' movement are white, middle class women who are not, by and large, structurally disadvantaged – which perhaps explains the decentring of the socio-economic in breastfeeding politics. It's also a good example of what [Nancy Fraser calls](#) the politics of recognition, in which a focus on acknowledging stigma has superseded concerns with social justice.

The politics of recognition, a politics of difference and relative status, is the dominant mode in the contemporary political field. This is not, however, to echo the very glib and reactionary critiques of 'identity politics' which have circulated in the media recently and which tend to focus on trans people. There are important differences between the identity attached to breastfeeding and those experienced and lived by trans people, which *are* a source of oppression because of a lack of social recognition (and this has far-reaching impacts in relation to issues such as access to education, employment, and vulnerability to violence). Breastfeeding, by contrast, is an example of how contemporary politics can become focused on recognition when this is not the key issue at hand. Interpreting low breastfeeding rates as an issue of social stigma gives rise to behavioural interventions which render invisible the many other valid reasons why a parent might not breastfeed – and these are often socio-economic. It also allows advocates to position themselves as a marginalised culture or identity despite their relative privilege.

Contemporary recognition politics of any type accord well with dominant neoliberal rationalities. Many important gains have been made because of this – for example, Fraser cites campaigns for gay marriage, and the Gender Recognition Act of 2004 could also be included here. However, the dovetailing of recognition politics with the neoliberal framework can also be problematic.

The privileging of cultural difference (broadly defined) shapes an attachment to 'authenticity', in which experiential narratives take precedence. Validating experiential knowledge is a crucial feminist principle and one we should protect, but it's also the case that within the 'tabloidisation' and 'testimonialism' of neoliberal culture, experiences have been commodified and are often now used as the trump card. This informs several contemporary 'experience wars' in which particular personal stories prop up certain ideological perspectives and are then dismissed by others as inauthentic versions of reality.

Contemporary neo-imperialist agendas make strategic use of the principles of gender and LGBT equality, mainly in order to define Muslim cultures as Other and inherently and uniquely misogynist and homophobic. Women's experiences have been caught up in this, and high profile activists such as Mona Eltahawy and Ayaan Hirsi Ali have often been used as 'native informants'. However, critiques of this neoconservative politics also sometimes fetishise ideas around agency and authenticity as they put forward alternative narratives, positioning all Muslim women who speak out against gender equality as Western dupes. Within this dynamic the uses to which experiences are put begin to define the narratives themselves. This is a politics of positionality first and foremost in which experiences are caught up in broader battles and then validated and dismissed accordingly. So the first question we ask when someone shares their experience is 'whose side are you on?'



In sex industry debates personal stories also abound, particularly on the Internet and in the press. There's a certain homogeneity of experience depending on the surrounding political agenda – those in favour of decriminalisation tend to talk in terms of choice, and abolitionists rely on 'survivor stories' from traumatised exited women (and it's usually, if not always, women). Each side claims ownership of the 'authentic' experience and attributes false consciousness to the other – sex workers who talk about choice are seen as puppets of the patriarchy, while radical feminists who favour abolition are drab and prudish. Again, positionality is key to which experiences are considered valid, and may also produce a certain objectification and flattening out of lived realities. A number of sex workers have written about how the radical feminist definition of their work as *itself* victimisation has led groups and individuals within the industry to deemphasise or hide difficult experiences, in order to avoid fuelling criminalisation agendas. "Sex workers with negative experiences are indeed more openly welcomed by Antis", [Lori Adorable](#) says, "even though they're only valued in a tokenizing way."

The use of experience as currency polarises and renders invisible positions in between – so the sex industry – or Islam – becomes either all empowering or all oppressive. Women with differing experiences can't co-exist and individuals can't hold mixed or ambivalent feelings. There's also a space where structural and historical dynamics should appear, in particular the impact of colonisation and colonialism on Muslim-majority countries and communities and the situating of commercial sex within a post-Fordist capitalist system with a service-based consumer culture, high unemployment and shrinking social welfare.

The dominant register of experience also creates a personalisation of critique, with judgments settling on individuals making choices to survive, attributions of false consciousness and an increasing propensity to diagnose '-isms' and '-phobias' within political debate. Behind this last is understandable reaction to the long and continuing history of attempts to cloak prejudice in political analysis, especially in relation to Islam, the sex industry and trans issues. There has also been a great deal of selective critique and wilful misinterpretation – for instance, the examination of sex and sexuality only tends to happen in relation to the sex industry, gender issues are often pointed out within Muslim societies and not others, and critiques of identity politics have been misguided – and hurtfully – used to deny transgender experience.

We should – and we must – continue to name and oppose such bigotries when we see them. However, I'm also interested in thinking about how, as the fourth wave develops, we can facilitate debates between those feminists who may have different views but common goals, which don't spiral into cycles of suspicion, accusation and denial that ultimately feed the backlash (although this is not a 'call for unity' which enjoins us all to fall in line with the most privileged, either).



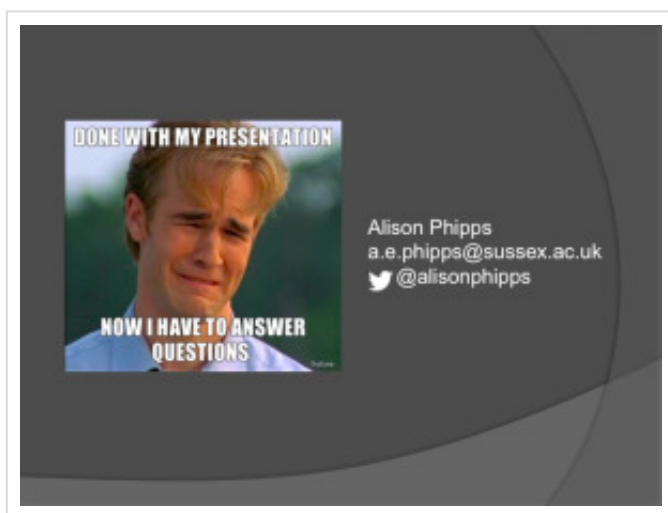
Coming full circle now, the furore around Julian Assange showed how effective the backlash has been. There was a monsterring of feminism apparent even on the left, with Assange claiming that he had fallen into a '[hornet's nest of revolutionary feminists](#)', and that Sweden was like '[Saudi Arabia for men](#)'. He called the prosecutor a 'man-hating lesbian' and Sweden a 'man-hating matriarchy', and [his supporters](#) termed his accusers 'radical and militant feminists' and their lawyers 'gender lawyers' who were biased against men.

The fourth wave of feminism is developing in a context where feminists can be monsters on both the left and right. This is a product of the interaction between radical feminism's relationship to neoconservative ideologies and the individualistic neoliberal cultural and political field. However, in this dialectic between neoliberalism and neoconservatism, rejecting one often pushes you into the arms of the other. So in outrage at the dubious ways in which neoconservative discourses appropriate women's victimisation, too often we end up mobilising neoliberal versions of empowerment and choice. And in doing this we lose a focus on how choices are socially situated, subjectivities are complex, and states and globalising markets in particular restrict our autonomy.

I want to finish on a positive note – there are excellent examples of contemporary feminisms which are structural, intersectional and truly radical. Often this type of knowledge is what's been described in one of today's abstracts as 'unauthorised' – it's dialogic, it's electronic, it can be fleeting, and it's difficult within the conventions and sluggishness of academia to represent it effectively. For instance, [sex work labour rights activists](#) are increasingly [framing personal testimony](#) within a critique of austerity politics and [specific effects of criminalisation](#). The intersectional politics articulated by and around trans women of colour explores how [state and individual violences](#), [socio-economics](#) and [identities](#) inform and produce each other. Coalitions between these groups and others are being built. I'm going

to finish with a [quote from Laverne Cox](#) – talking about intersectionality, she brings to mind Crenshaw's original conception, which was about connecting different experiences and situating them within structural frameworks.

'We have to have space to evolve, but we have to be willing to have the conversations and know how to. Look at the "Stop and Frisk" march that happened last year that really integrated LGBT and black folks. Look at how the NAACP can begin to back that and how they're evolving. So opinions can shift. We have to come together across political differences too and build coalitions even though we may not always agree on exactly everything.'



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